

Shawn Rider
Fall 1999
CC2005 || Attrib, Derivs OK, NonCommerical

The Swamp Waters of Your Affection

Her grace pulls you in. She doesn't follow many conventions, and she shatters stereotypes and social roles. Sometimes quotation marks, sometimes not; it doesn't matter to Grace Paley. She does what she has to do, and she's been doing it since 1954 or '55. I appreciate a writer for whom the product of writing is not as important as the act of writing. And the act of writing itself is a fleeting thing – once you're done, it's over. So what is left? Paley leaves us these challenging little bits of deception. They masquerade as "stories," plain and simple, lowercase s-t-o-r-i-e-s about people (New York Jews mostly) l-i-v-i-n in a "not the best of times, not the worst of times" situation, somehow managing to keep a smile on the back burner, ready for company. But Paley has other plans, whether she knows it or not. Her stories are little switch-houses of power. She empowers readers, both male and female, through her characters, who are often at the same time strong and pathetic. Paley creates, almost without exception, a strong, female backbone in each of her stories, and a man with good intentions. While themes of empowerment and gender creep into her stories and work in fascinating ways, what gets you, what grabs hold and won't let go of you, what makes her a princess among dogs, is her grace.

"The Contest," a story from her first collection, *The Little Disturbances of Man*, foregrounds Paley's experimentation and stock themes. While the themes and movement of the story are unmistakably Paley, "The Contest" is unlike many of her pieces. It is the story of a man, Fred Sims, and a woman, Dotty Wasserman, and their fated love. The

overall plot outline is similar to other Paley stories, such as "The Pale Pink Roast" and "Goodbye and Good Luck." What makes "The Contest" different is mainly in the narration. Paley uses a first-person point of view centered in Fred. Generally her main character is female, and, certainly, Dotty is an important presence in the story. But Fred's point of view tells us a story that would be inaccessible any other way. Basically, Fred thinks of himself as something of a player, eschewing the standard nine-to-five lifestyle and picking up cool blondes at parties. He meets Dotty and the two get on quite well. Dotty and Fred are on and off for awhile, until Dot comes up with the idea of competing in a contest. The "Jews in the News" contest is being sponsored by *Morganlicht*, a Yiddish newspaper, and for three months the two decipher clues daily, hoping to win the grand prize which includes \$5,000 and a trip to Israel and Europe for two.

Up until that point, things are fine for the two. Paley gets us into the story quickly, undercutting her prose with that sharp sense of humor. "I never get into my Rice Krispies till noon," writes Paley, in the voice of Fred. Yes, Fred never would be up and around before noon. He's a playboy, a swinging bachelor, just ask him. He *has* a sense of humor, and he thinks he has a sense of the world. There is not a time throughout the story that he doesn't believe wholeheartedly that he is in control. When he first meets Dotty, they see each other for awhile, and then she wants to know, "Where are we going?" Fred can't answer that question, so he doesn't, and she leaves. Then she comes back to spend a clandestine evening with him. Dotty keeps trying to discuss moral and ethical issues, encouraging Fred to marry her. Fred cuts her off with dirty little remarks. As he says, "Say something vulgar and she'd suddenly be all over me," which makes his tactic not only utilitarian, but rewarding.

In reality, it is Dotty who has the power in the relationship. She is the one who really knows what she wants, a husband. Fred is adrift in the sea of slack, and he's happy being that way, but it doesn't provide a firm position to assert control. Fred is at the mercy of fate's whim. Dotty creates her destiny. She is in love with Fred, evidenced by her repeated attempts to tame him. While Dotty definitely exerts pressure on Fred to marry her, she isn't interested in changing him very much. Simply adopting enough direction and restraint to commit to marriage seems as though it would be enough for Dotty.

The two win the contest, although under Dotty's name, and they meet to divide the prize. The trip, it turns out, is only for married couples or single individuals, and Fred sees this as a trap. He's not having it, and Dotty embarks alone. She writes Fred often, sending photos and letters, but he just keeps getting more and more bitter. While she's away he "take[s] a permanent job for a couple of months" writing ad copy and thinking about how all their profit was going into the pockets of foreigners, and the whole affair just burns him up inside. Dotty sends a telegram with the time and place she's arriving back in New York, but Fred opts to be a tough guy and not show up. Unsurprisingly, that is the last he hears from Dot until he sends her a scathing letter. The letter calls her a prostitute, and reiterates that she cannot control him no matter how hard she tries, and that this is her last chance to contact him and possibly rekindle their relationship.

But here is the most open window into Fred's being. In the letter he writes that she doesn't have the nerve to face him after the trip. In fact, it was Fred who did not show up to meet Dot. Dot not only maintained a correspondence throughout her vacation, but did attempt to see Fred upon her return. Fred sees the world as a contest, and, while Dot is

dogmatic about winning the Jews in the News competition, Fred is dead set against giving in to her in what he sees as a contest between men and women. He writes, "But I will not be eaten by any woman." What is that supposed to mean? Apparently his mother tried to get the family to hook him up while lying on her death bed. Fred claims that she took the part of him that he'd left for her and tried to give it away. In the letter he writes, ""You cannot impose your narrow view of life on me." There is nothing to suggest that Dot has a "narrow view of life." After all, she just got back from Israel and the major capitols of Europe. That'll broaden horizons. No, Fred never gets it. He has misread her in every way possible throughout the story. He thinks she has "peasant wisdom," something that could never touch his straight-up wiseguy wisdom. After Fred stands her up at the train station she never contacts him. Fred assumes she is "crawling with guilt," but she has already given up on him. He fails to see that it's his move. In the end he gets a hundred dollars, and a portfolio of slides of the places he missed. He never sees Dot again.

The characters are endearing, due mainly to Paley's hard work. Although, in "The Contest" the hard work turns into playful, deceptively simple reading. Paley's signature style is evident in this piece, and she pushes it further than in some other stories. As always, the prose is quick and humorous. Paley writes in a way that gets you reading quickly across the line, and then whips you back into a lower gear to notice the little quip she attached with a dependant clause. It's beauty, pure beauty. Small turns like "I never get into my Rice Krispies till noon," and, "I never forget a name, no matter what typeface it appears in," are just brilliant. They inject the story with a certain absurdity and a definite humor that softens the blow of what is otherwise a fairly sad story of unrequited

love. But that is what Paley is always doing. Her characters are faced with difficulty, but they persevere and maintain their humanity and dignity through humor. Paley's characters are a product of their time, evidenced by her use of contemporary culture and issues such as the mention of Rice Krispies, the occupation of Eastern Europe, and her quips about WWII. She sums up the artistic world of the day by describing "an *Art News* full of Dutchmen who had lived eighty years in forty."

And this is why I've loved reading Paley. In a way that seems as contemporary today as ever, she writes stories that create an artistic veil. It would be easy to read Paley quickly, chuckle at the more obvious jokes (there are plenty of them), and be done with it. In fact, it would be enjoyable to read Paley that way. But there are hidden treasures in her works. Pieces like "The Contest" leave you scratching your head the first time through, but reward further investigation. What is so beautiful is how Paley packs so much in behind such a spartan screen. It doesn't look like there is a lot of room for ideas and themes to hide in Paley's prose. It is remarkable to be capable of pulling off such a feat, and Paley does it with style, gusto, and grace.